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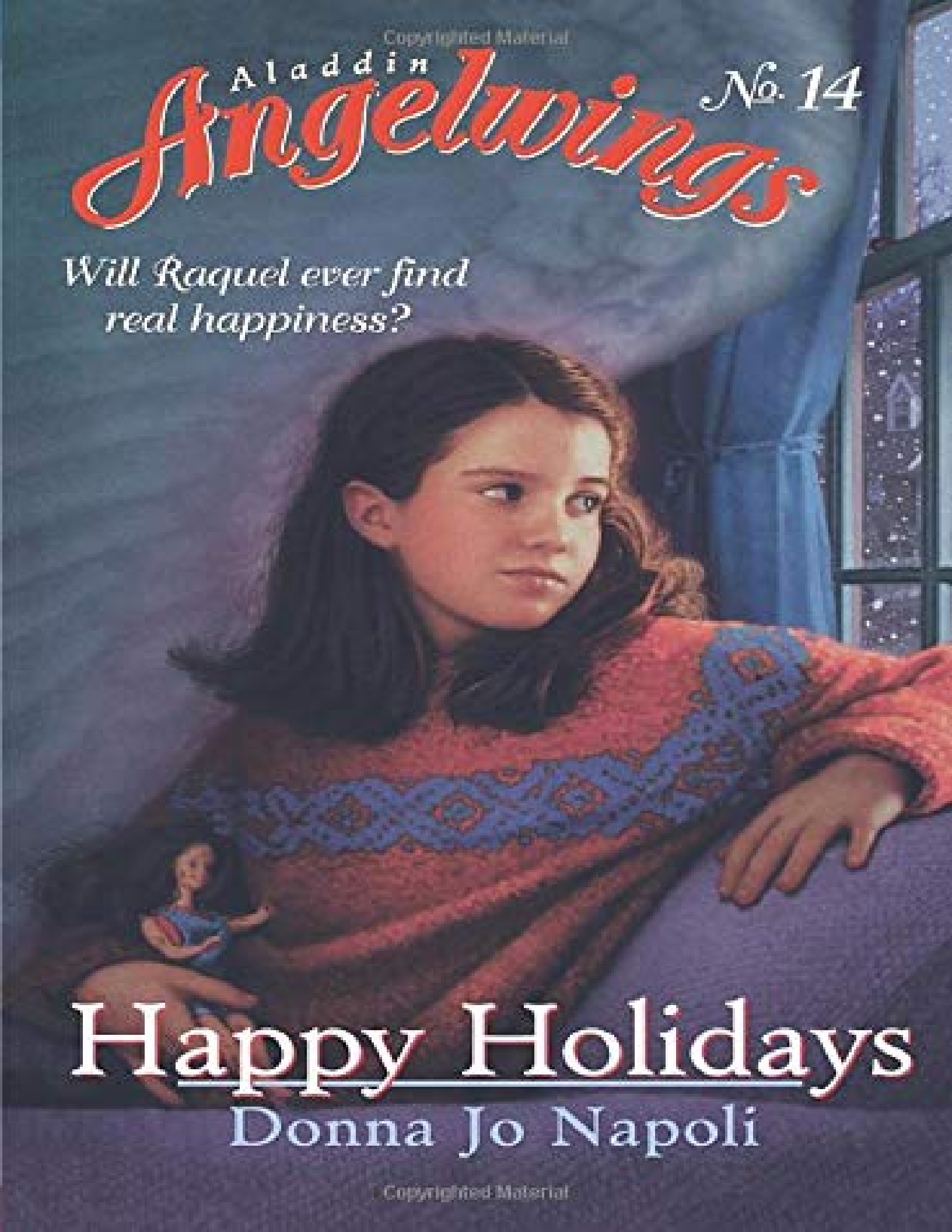
Aladdin

Angelwings

No. 14

Will Raquel ever find real happiness?



Happy Holidays

Donna Jo Napoli

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For the grumpy ones among us, and those who make them smile

Thank you to all my family, Brenda Bowen, Karen Riskin, and Richard Tchen

Angel Talk

Sunlight reflected off the snow, making everything more brilliant. The passing cars looked newer, the people's clothes seemed snappier, even the bricks of the buildings took on a richer hue. The world was a better place after a snowfall—that's all there was to it. The Little Angel of Happiness strolled along the freshly shoveled sidewalk, taking it all in with a grin.

Across the street at the tiny station a group of adults stood on the train platform. A couple of them read newspapers. A few others chatted in little groups. And still others simply waited patiently, seeming to enjoy the bright, cold day as much as the little angel.

But one man definitely wasn't enjoying himself. He patted his vest pocket and felt all his other pockets and riffled through his briefcase. Now he walked in a circle, looking at the ground.

The Little Angel of Happiness recognized the opportunity. He scanned the ground. Nothing. He crossed the street and went along the sidewalk that led up to the train station. It didn't take long for his efforts to be rewarded: A pair of reading glasses in a black case lay at the very edge of the walk, half on the concrete, half in the snow.

The train pulled into the station. The man was bent over, searching under the bench beside the platform. But now he stood up and looked at the train with a face full of resignation.

The little angel ran as fast as he could and placed the glasses case in the man's path as he walked to the train.

The man's mouth opened in surprise. With a smile of satisfaction, he put the case in his vest pocket and climbed onto the train.

The Little Angel of Happiness took a deep, happy breath. There was nothing better than starting out the day with a gift that made someone smile. He wandered over to the bench and sat down.

A discarded newspaper lay there. The headlines told of a storm on the way. It was forming way, way up, near the Arctic Circle, but if it did what the forecasters expected, it would be here in a couple of days. The temperature would plummet, and another foot of snow would drop. The little angel put his elbows on his knees and rested his chin in his palms. Winter storms brought so many problems for so many people. His eyes clouded over with worry.

"Good morning." The Archangel of Happiness pushed the newspaper to one side and sat down near the little angel. "I saw that maneuver with the lost glasses. Very nice."

"Thanks." The little angel gave a brief smile.

"You don't seem happy. What's the matter?"

The little angel almost started talking about the storm, when he noticed the piece of paper in the archangel's hand. It had an address written on it. "Who lives there?"

"Oh, just someone or other. No one you'd be interested in." The Archangel of Happiness crossed his legs and leaned back on the bench. He gave a phony yawn.

The little angel smiled. "You're teasing me, aren't you? I bet that's the address of a child. You've got a task for me."

"What do you know, you're wearing a smile again. You do know about happiness." The archangel laughed. "I guess you are the right little angel for this task, after all. The child who lives at this address needs a lot of help learning to find delight in the world."

The little angel jumped off the bench in excitement. "The winter holidays are starting soon. If I help this child and earn enough feathers to get my wings, I can fly through the holidays."

"Now that's a nice goal," said the archangel. "But, more important, if you're successful, the child will be able to open her heart to the joys of the season."

The little angel gave a small smile of apology. “You’re right. That is more important.” Then he tilted his head playfully. “Still, among all the bells of this holiday season, it’ll be thrilling to hear my own special bell—the bell that will ring when I get my wings.”

The archangel laughed again. He handed the little angel the slip of paper. “You’re good at finding addresses. Want to lead the way?”

Macaroni and Cheese

What was that smell? Raquel peeked in the oven. Baked macaroni and cheese. But it wasn't ready yet, and Raquel was hungry.

She stamped her foot. Nothing happened, because no one was around to hear it. So she wandered into Grandma and Grandpa's room.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" said Grandma. She stood at the window and didn't even turn around. Old people were supposed to have poor hearing, but not Raquel's grandparents. All Raquel had to do was open her door a crack, and Grandma would greet her. "Would you like to help me?"

Raquel came up beside Grandma.

Grandma handed her a miniature spade. "I think this narcissus over here, the third one from the end, is going to bloom today. If you just loosen up the dirt a couple of inches out from the bulb, that might help."

The row of ten narcissus bulbs in the aluminum flower box stood straight and evenly spaced, like drummers in a parade. Raquel poked the little spade into the dirt, when she happened to look out the window.

Hector was clumping along the sidewalk with a huge blue plastic saucer slung over his shoulder. He wore a big grin and looked like he was talking to himself. Maybe he was singing. Raquel just bet he was going to the sledding hill at the elementary school. If it weren't so cold, she'd open the window and ask him.

"I want a blue saucer," said Raquel.

"A blue saucer? You mean a teacup and saucer?"

"No, a sledding saucer."

"Don't you have a new sled?" asked Grandma. "Your father bought it for your birthday. It's the same shape as the toboggan I had as a girl."

"Who cares?" Raquel jammed the spade into the dirt so that it stood there on its own. "I want one like Hector's. It's better than mine. No, I want one bigger than Hector's." She brushed off her hands, even though they weren't dirty, and went back into the kitchen.

Mommy was just taking the casserole of macaroni out of the oven.

Raquel got a plate and sat at the table.

Mommy put a sandwich on Raquel's plate.

"I want macaroni and cheese."

"That's for my cookie group's luncheon," said Mommy. "I made you tuna fish."

Raquel could just imagine all those mothers sitting around talking and laughing as they ate like pigs. "They get the good stuff and I get junk?"

"Be glad I'm going to this cookie luncheon," said Mommy. "We each baked ten dozen of our favorite cookies and we're exchanging them, with the recipes. I'll come home with a dozen each of ten different kinds of cookies. And if you really love any of them, I'll have the recipe so I can make more."

"I hate cookies."

"Don't be silly. You gobble cookies up. And now we'll be set for the holidays. No more baking."

"You'll be set," said Raquel. "I never bake, anyway." Something green stuck out from inside Raquel's sandwich. She lifted a corner of the bread and peeked. "You put olives in here. The ones with the red stuff in the middle."

"They taste so good. And don't they look pretty? And seasonal." Mommy gave a happy sigh as she put her casserole into a carry-bag.

The sandwich didn't smell anywhere near as good as the casserole. Raquel went and sat under the stairs.

Grandpa walked by. “Raquel, is that you under the stairs again?”

“Yes.”

“Down in the dumps, huh? What is it this time?”

“Mommy made macaroni and cheese for the women at her luncheon,” said Raquel, “and Hector has a new blue sledding saucer.”

“Oh.” Grandpa just stood there.

“They’re happy,” said Raquel. “They have good things. All I have is tuna fish. And I hate green olives with red stuff.”

Grandpa reached in his pocket. “Breath mint?”

Raquel looked at the little roll of breath mints helplessly. Only Grandpa would make such a yucky offer. She wrinkled her nose. “I hate everything.”

Angel Talk

"What a brat." The Little Angel of Happiness shook his head.

"What?" The archangel looked sternly at the little angel. "Your job is to help children, not judge them."

"But Raquel is awful. She's got no reason whatsoever to act like that."

The Archangel of Happiness put up both hands. "Whoa. First of all, how do you know that?"

"Take a look. Her mother made ten dozen cookies just so Raquel could have a variety of cookies for the holidays. Now that's what I call a great mother."

"Don't you happen to be a cookie monster, little angel?"

"Well, yes, but anyone would appreciate that. And her grandparents treat her really nice. And tuna fish with olives is delicious."

The archangel laughed. "I think maybe you're a bit carried away by the food. Listen, little angel, even if Raquel doesn't have a reason to act the way she does, the fact is, she acts that way."

"Right. And I don't like how she acts one bit."

"I doubt she does, either. Like her grandfather said, Raquel is down in the dumps."

There was no arguing with that. Raquel did look tiny when she curled up under the stairs—tiny and sad. The Little Angel of Happiness had wanted to scold Raquel for acting so nasty. But now his annoyance melted away. "Raquel said Hector's saucer was better than her sled."

"Yes, she did."

"And she said the people at the luncheon were getting the good stuff, while she got junk."

The Archangel of Happiness gave a little humpf. "Yup."

“And she said they were happy.” The little angel clapped his hands. “I know why Raquel’s down in the dumps. I know what her problem is.”

“You do? You figured it out so fast?”

“Yes. And she’s exactly the kind of child I can help.”

“That’s the spirit.” The Archangel of Happiness tightened the knot of his belt. “So shall we talk about a plan?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No, I’ve already got one,” said the little angel. “I just need a pen and a piece of paper.”

The archangel handed over his fountain pen and his pad of paper. Then he hovered over the little angel’s shoulder.

The little angel gave him a big smile and wrote in his best penmanship.

Drums

The school day dragged. This was the last day before the winter break, and the teachers didn't even bother to try teaching anything. No one could pay attention, anyway.

That was fine with Raquel. Schoolwork was pretty easy for her, and usually she was at the top of her class. But even Raquel had other things on her mind now. When Mr. Rorey turned his back on the class, Raquel waved to Sarah across the room.

Sarah nodded.

That was the agreed-upon signal. Both girls got up and went toward the hamster habitat at the back of the classroom.

Raquel's heart beat harder with each step. Sarah's family celebrated Hanukkah, and last night was the third night of all those gifts. Every day for eight days in a row, Sarah would get something fabulous. She had asked for a soccer goal—one of those aluminum frames with a net on it—so she could practice in her backyard. Sarah loved soccer. Raquel didn't play any team sports. Still, there was something wonderful about actually owning your own soccer goal. But Sarah hadn't gotten it on the first night or the second night.

Raquel sidled up beside Sarah. "Did you finally get it?"

Sarah broke into a huge smile. "The big size, too. It's great."

The big size. A sudden sting of jealousy made Raquel sniff. "You're lucky."

"My dad said I earned it by working so hard at soccer." Sarah kicked an imaginary ball toward the side windows.

"You can't even play with it for months," said Raquel. "Too bad."

"That's okay," said Sarah. "It'll be there when I need it."

"Too bad, anyway," said Raquel.

"I'm getting a drum for Kwanza," said Rasheed. He sat in the back of his row and turned around in his seat as he talked to the girls. "It's from Ghana."

"I thought you were Christian," said Raquel.

"I am. We celebrate Christmas, too. They're not the same kind of thing. Kwanza's about African heritage."

"Drums are noisy," Raquel said, and quickly went back to her seat.

After school Raquel walked home, slipping and sliding in the little glaze of ice that had formed on the sidewalks. It was almost fun, until she remembered Hector's blue sledding saucer. She kicked at a chunk of hardened snow that had fallen off the little walls of snow on each side of the walk. It shattered across her boot tip and looked almost pretty, like white dust, until she thought of Sarah kicking a soccer ball into her new goal. She pressed her lips together and marched homeward, but now the sound of her regular footsteps was like a drum, like the African drum Raquel imagined Rasheed getting for Kwanza. Raquel had a drum—a little brown leather one that she used to beat on all the time. It was somewhere in her old toy box. She could find it if she wanted to. But the leather was worn down at the edges. It wasn't nice—it wasn't anything like Rasheed's drum would be.

Raquel ran the rest of the way. She fell twice and got her pants messy with snow and sidewalk slop. She opened the front door and threw off her backpack and coat and shouted, "Who's home?"

Grandpa sat at the dining room table playing that card game solitaire that he loved so much. He gave Raquel a little wave without even looking up.

Raquel could tell from the feeling of the house that no one else was home. Daddy was at work, of course. But Grandma and Mommy were out, probably having fun.

She walked over to Grandpa. "I want a soccer goal," she said, "an aluminum one with a net on it. The big size."

Grandpa lowered his bushy eyebrows. "I didn't know you played soccer."

"That's not the point."

"What is the point?" asked Grandpa.

"I just want one." Raquel's cheeks burned. "And I want a drum."

"We can do something about that," said Grandpa.

Raquel stepped closer. "We can?"

"Sure. I finished a box of oatmeal this morning. We can put waxed paper over the end and make a fine drum."

"Grandpa, I'm not a little kid. I want a real drum. An African drum."

"African, huh?" Grandpa smiled. "I like African music, too."

Grandpa's good nature made Raquel want to scream. She looked at the cards on the table. Stupid Grandpa, he'd take an hour to play a game that should only take five minutes. She reached over and moved a 7 onto an 8 that was just waiting for it. Then she stamped out of the room and curled up under the stairs.

Everyone in the world had terrific things. Everyone but Raquel.

Something crackled under her bottom. She shifted her weight onto one hip and felt the floor. It was a sheet of paper. Raquel rolled onto her stomach and turned so that her head stuck out into the hall, where there was enough light to take a good look at the paper.

She read, "If you want to be happy, trade something with a perfectly happy person." A little chill crept along Raquel's spine.

She got up and went back into the dining room. She put the piece of paper on the table beside Grandpa. "Do you know who wrote this?"

Grandpa studied the words. "No one in this house. That's not a handwriting I know."

That's what Raquel thought, too. Who put that paper in her special spot? And who knew she wasn't happy?

And what did she have to trade?

Angel Talk

"Did you write that note?" asked the Archangel of Happiness.

"I certainly did." The little angel smiled in what he hoped wasn't too proud a way.

The archangel twisted the tip of one side of his mustache. "I don't like this. It's wrong to deceive children."

The Little Angel of Happiness felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. "I'm not deceiving anyone."

"Then what exactly is that note all about? A person can't get happy just by finding someone who is happy and trading something with that other person. Happiness isn't a thing that gets passed around like cookies."

"I know that." The little angel spoke fast. "But if you believe you'll get happy by doing something, then maybe you will."

"That sounds like a lot of confused pop psychology to me." The Archangel of Happiness glowered. "In simple words, it's a trick."

"Maybe so," said the little angel. "But I'm not trying to deceive anyone, I promise. Just give me a chance. If I'm right about what Raquel's problem is, trading things might really work."

The archangel looked doubtful, but he gave a little shrug. "All right. Everyone deserves a chance. But if I see Raquel getting the wrong idea about the nature of happiness, you'll have to try a different way."

Sleds

Raquel put on her coat again and kissed Grandpa on the cheek. "I'm going over to Hector's house for a little while. I'll be back soon."

"Hector? The one with the new sledding saucer?"

Raquel was surprised that Grandpa remembered. "That's him."

"Are you going to trade sleds?" Grandpa asked without looking up from his cards.

Grandpa wasn't so stupid, after all. "Yes."

"Good luck."

Raquel went out to the garage and got her red birthday sled. She pulled it behind her down the block to Hector's house. She rang the doorbell.

Hector opened the door. "Hey."

"Hey. Want to trade sleds?"

Hector looked at Raquel's sled. "Come on inside."

Raquel came inside, dragging her sled.

"Who is that at the door?" Hector's big brother called from upstairs.

"No one," said Hector. "Just Raquel."

"You can't have friends over till Mom gets home," yelled down Hector's brother.

"She's not a friend," yelled back Hector. He looked at Raquel. "You're lucky you don't have a big brother or sister." He walked around Raquel's sled, inspecting it.

"What do you mean?" Raquel said, pulling the sled close possessively. "Don't you like your brother?"

"Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. He can make my life miserable. This sled is sweet. Okay, I'll trade."

"Nu-uh." Raquel picked up her sled and opened the door. "The deal's off."

"Why?"

"You're not perfectly happy, so it won't work." Raquel went outside.

"What are you talking about?" said Hector.

"I have to find someone else. Bye." Raquel pulled her sled home and put it back in the garage. She went inside.

Grandpa wasn't at the table anymore. But she could hear him clanking around in the kitchen. She went in and sat on the bench in the breakfast nook.

"Back so soon?" Grandpa stirred a pan on the stove. "Did you trade?"

"No."

"Want some hot chocolate?" Grandpa put a heaping spoonful of cocoa into a mug and poured steaming milk on top. Then he did the same to a second mug. He put one in front of Raquel and sat across from her. "You don't seem too unhappy about not trading."

"I'm not, really. My sled is pretty good. It might even be better than his. He was ready to trade, after all." Raquel took a sip of hot chocolate.

"Hello," called Daddy from the front hall.

"We're in the kitchen," called back Raquel.

Grandpa got up and poured another mug of hot chocolate. When Daddy walked in, he handed it to him.

"Thanks, Pops," said Daddy. Raquel slid over, and Daddy sat on the bench beside her. He stirred his hot chocolate. "What're you two talking about?"

"Raquel almost traded away her sled," said Grandpa.

Daddy put down his spoon. "What? I bought you that sled. You can't trade it."

"I don't want to anymore," said Raquel. "I think I'll find something else to trade."

"What else have you got that Hector would want?" asked Grandpa.

"Oh, I won't trade with Hector. He's not perfectly happy. I'll find someone else."

Daddy rubbed his forehead. "What's this all about?"

"Nothing."

"Raquel, trades aren't a good idea," Daddy said in that voice he used when Mommy was out and he felt in charge. "You should enjoy your things. And if you want to give something away, that's okay, as long as you clear it with Mommy first. But when you trade, there's always the danger that someone might feel cheated."

"Don't worry, I'll trade something icky."

"Wait a minute," said Daddy. "That's not what I meant."

"I don't want to talk anymore," said Raquel. "I have something to do." She dropped down under the table and crawled out past Daddy's knees. She stood up. "Bye."

Daddy jerked toward her and knocked over his hot chocolate. "Now how'd I do that?" He gave a heavy sigh, reached for the dish towel, and sopped it up.

Raquel ran for the stairs.

Angel Talk

The Archangel of Happiness paced up and down the sidewalk. He went so fast, the little angel had to practically run to keep up. Suddenly the archangel stopped. He folded his arms across his chest and tapped his foot.

The little angel wanted to ask what he was thinking. But the sense of preoccupation on the archangel's face stopped him. So he looked around.

The snow on Raquel's front yard was perfectly smooth, like a fresh white sheet. The sun was going down fast, and in the dusky evening the yard seemed serene and lovely. The Little Angel of Happiness spread his fingers and pushed both hands into the snow. Then he drew a face, with a protruding muzzle under the handprints.

"I can see what you're doing," said the archangel.

"You can?" The little angel stepped back and looked at his drawing with skepticism. "I didn't really think anyone would recognize it's a moose."

"I don't mean your snow drawing." The archangel leaned over. "A moose, huh? How about we just draw in the body, too? Long legs will help." He drew as he talked.

The little angel gave an appreciative *"ahhhh"* sound. "You're good."

"Why don't you draw the tail while I work on the hooves?"

The two angels drew side by side.

"As I was saying," said the archangel, "I understand what you're after. At least part of it. It was very clever how you got Raquel to realize that her sled is nice, too. Now maybe she won't think everyone else has better things than she does."

The little angel finished drawing the tail and breathed on his hands to warm them up. "Actually, I didn't know that was going to happen. It just did."

"But it wouldn't have without your trading idea."

The little angel was glad to hear the archangel's words; it was true, Raquel had made progress, even if the little angel hadn't planned it. Still, he knew the archangel had been pacing for a reason. "So what's bothering you?"

"Raquel is now up in her room searching for something gooky —"

"'Icky' is what she said," interrupted the little angel.

"Right, icky. Something icky to trade. I still don't approve of this whole trading idea. In fact, I'm in complete agreement with Raquel's father. But at least if she's going to trade, she should have a good attitude. Trading away something icky isn't a good attitude. Raquel wants to make sure that if someone gets cheated, it's not her. She completely misunderstood what her father said."

The little angel nodded. "That's true. I wanted her father to stop her and explain more, but I couldn't think of a good way to get him to do that. I botched the whole thing."

"What do you mean? What did you do?"

"I pushed him toward her."

The Archangel of Happiness sucked in his breath in realization. "So that's why he knocked over his hot chocolate."

"Yes. And then he got so busy sopping it up, he forgot all about Raquel. So I failed."

"Too bad. Adults can be harder to prod than children. You have to go very carefully with them; you have to be subtle. Otherwise they realize something's going on and they freak out and spout a lot of gibberish about losing their minds. Parents are the worst, actually." The archangel drew a moon over the head of the moose.

The little angel added a shower of stars. "Okay, I'll be careful. And I'll find a way to help Raquel get a generous spirit about this trade."

"Good," said the archangel. "I'll be right beside you."

Barbies

Raquel walked slowly around her room. Her bed was littered with stuffed animals. But she liked them. And her bookshelf overflowed with books. But she liked them, too. She had several board games. But they were mostly fun. And she had lots of CDs, but she was pretty sure Daddy would object if she tried to trade those.

The old toy box was shoved in a corner. Raquel thought of her worn-out drum. Sarah wouldn't want to trade for that, and Sarah was the person Raquel had decided to trade with. After all, Sarah was perfectly happy.

Barbies. Barbies were the answer. Raquel went into her parents' bedroom and picked up the phone. She dialed Sarah's number.

"Hello?" It was Sarah's mother.

"Hello, Mrs. Friedler. This is Raquel. May I please speak with Sarah?"

"Sure. Just a minute."

"Hi," came Sarah's panting voice. Her dog barked in the background.

"Want to come over and trade dolls?"

"Dolls? I don't have a lot of dolls," said Sarah. "You're the one with all the dolls."

"That's why you should want to trade," said Raquel. "I'll take your old baby doll."

"The one with the melted hand?" asked Sarah.

"Yes. And I'll give you a Barbie."

"What's the catch?" asked Sarah.

"There isn't any catch."

"Okay," said Sarah. "I'll get my mom to drive me over, and we'll trade. But you can't tell my mom about the Barbie."

"I know she hates them." Raquel remembered the lecture Mrs. Friedler had given them once. She said Barbie dolls gave girls the wrong idea about the size and shape of women's bodies. But Raquel didn't care. Barbies were fun. "I won't say anything."

"Good. See you soon." The phone clicked.

Raquel ran downstairs. "Daddy?"

"I'm in the den," called Daddy.

Raquel hurried to him. He was at the desk paying bills. "Sarah's coming over, and we're going to trade dolls."

"I told you I don't want you trading. Anyway, your mother's not home yet, and you shouldn't do anything like this without her approval."

"That doesn't matter. I'll trade my oldest doll. I dyed her hair last year when I was little and dumb, and it came out awful. Mommy won't care about that. I won't get cheated."

Daddy frowned. "The trade has to be fair to everyone, Raquel. No one should get cheated."

"No one will. Sarah's giving me the baby doll whose hand got burned off when we left it by the stove. The dolls are equally icky."

Daddy ripped a check out of the checkbook and stuck it in an envelope. "All right."

Raquel ran back upstairs and fumbled around in the drawer where she kept all her Barbie junk until she found that old doll. It looked pathetic.

The doorbell rang.

Daddy let in Mrs. Friedler and Sarah.

"Hi," Raquel called from the top of the stairs. "Come on up, Sarah. Hurry."

Sarah ran upstairs with a plastic bag banging against her knee.

Raquel grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her into her bedroom.

"What's the hurry?" asked Sarah.

"Here." Raquel put the Barbie in Sarah's hand.

"She's kind of messed up." Sarah smoothed her hair.

Raquel had a twinge of conscience. "You don't feel cheated, do you? Because a trade isn't good if it isn't fair."

Sarah looked confused. "What's going on? Are you trying to back out?"

"No. I just want to make sure you feel good about the trade. That's how my father wants it, too."

Sarah turned over the Barbie. "I guess she's not too bad. I like her face." Then she glanced toward the open Barbie drawer. "Does she come with anything?"

Raquel quickly closed the drawer. It was bad enough that she was giving a Barbie in exchange for Sarah's ugly old baby doll. She shouldn't have to give anything else. She shook her head.

Sarah chewed her bottom lip. "I feel okay about this trade. But I'd feel even better about it if she came with a change of clothes. Then you could tell your father I'm totally happy."

Raquel flinched at the word. "But aren't you totally happy, anyway?"

"Huh? I don't know. I mean, I've always wanted a Barbie. And, come on, Raquel, the best part about a Barbie is changing her outfits. Don't be stingy."

Raquel snatched the Barbie out of Sarah's hands.

"Not so fast," said Grandpa. He came into the room.

Raquel was amazed. Grandpa hadn't walked upstairs in the whole two years since he and Grandma had moved in with them. But there he was, in Raquel's room. And it was obvious he'd been listening. "You shouldn't be up here, Grandpa. You're not supposed to climb the stairs."

"Don't you worry about me. I felt light as a feather coming up those stairs. My knees didn't hurt at all. It was almost as though someone were lifting me." Grandpa put his hands in his pockets and jingled his change. He leaned forward to take a look at the Barbie in Raquel's hands. "So you're trying to back out of a trade again? Funny-looking doll. What's the matter with her hair?"

Sarah made a strange sound, sort of like she was strangling.

Raquel looked quickly at Sarah, whose face was flushed and whose eyes were bright. Sarah really did want the Barbie. And Grandpa was looking hard at Raquel. And who cared whether or not Sarah was the right person to trade with? Raquel thrust the doll back into Sarah's hands. "She's yours."

Grandpa cleared his throat. "What did you say the best part about a Barbie was?"

Raquel looked at Grandpa's steady eyes. Then she opened the Barbie drawer. "And here's an extra outfit."

Sarah handed Raquel the plastic bag. "Kate's in there. She wets if you feed her a bottle."

"Thanks," said Raquel.

"I'll call you soon. Bye." Sarah waved at Raquel and Grandpa, and went downstairs.

Grandpa put a hand on Raquel's shoulder. "Are you happy yet?"

"Sort of. It felt good giving Sarah that Barbie. I didn't like it, anyway. But I'm not happy the way I want to be."

Grandpa's hand gave a few little pats. "It's hard to find a perfectly happy person, isn't it?"

Angel Talk

"Light as a feather,'" said the archangel. "That's what Raquel's grandfather said. Could it be that you had a part in that?"

"I walked behind him, with my hands under his arms to steady him," said the little angel. "He was easier to control than Raquel's father. He didn't seem to mind my pushing him, or even give it a second thought."

"Describe Raquel's grandfather to me," said the archangel.

"You know what he's like as well as I do," said the Little Angel of Happiness. "He's patient and easygoing and—"

"Describe him physically."

"Well, he's old and just a little bit overweight and not real strong and pretty tall, even though he kind of stoops, so it's hard to see how tall."

"That's right." The Archangel of Happiness put a finger in the center of the little angel's chest. "Do you think it's safe for him to climb stairs, even if you're behind him, giving a little support?"

"I guess not." The little angel got a quick shiver of panic at the image of Raquel's grandfather missing a step and tumbling down the stairs. "Oh, no. What a risk I took. And now he has to go back down. I'd better go help him fast before he tries those stairs on his own. Oh no oh no oh no."

"Shhh, now." The archangel pulled the little angel to him and hugged him. "This is the kind of problem you can fix, so why be unhappy?"

The little angel looked up at the archangel. "He really is big, and I really am not."

"We'll do it together, one of us on either side of him." The Archangel of Happiness's voice held all the strength that the little angel needed.

“Thank you.” The little angel grabbed the archangel by the hand. “Come on.”

“And, by the way, congratulations,” the archangel said, loping along.

“For what?”

“You got Raquel not to back out on that trade. Grandpa’s presence was exactly what she needed to carry through.”

The little angel would have laughed if he weren’t so worried about Grandpa. “That’s not why I brought Grandpa upstairs. I didn’t know Raquel was going to try to back out. All I wanted was to make sure that Raquel was fair about the trade, that she had a generous spirit, like we talked about.”

“Let me get this straight,” said the archangel. “Raquel knew that Sarah wasn’t perfectly happy, and she certainly didn’t want that baby doll. So she traded entirely out of good feelings—entirely because she wanted Sarah to be happy.” The archangel squeezed the little angel’s hand. “Yesterday I don’t think Raquel cared all that much about other people’s happiness. But today she does. She’s definitely making progress. And you are behind it, whether by design or not. Keep it up.”

The little angel squeezed back on the archangel’s hand, but he didn’t feel settled at all. How could he keep it up when it seemed nothing was within his control?

This Time of Year

The student directory lay open on Raquel's bed. She had gone through it twice. Many of the names were kids she didn't know, in grades behind her or in grades ahead of her. But plenty were kids she did know. And plenty of them were happy. Still, there was no one who seemed perfectly happy.

Grandpa was right: This wasn't easy.

Raquel went to her top drawer and took out the sheet of paper she'd found under the stairs. She read it again. There was no getting around it: She needed to find a perfectly happy person.

Mommy and Grandma came in the front door, stamping and laughing.

Raquel peeked over the top stair railing. Snow covered their hats and the shoulders of their coats. It fell off their boots onto the thick rug that lay inside the door just for that purpose. "Yay, it's snowing," she crowed, and zipped down the stairs. "Where were you?"

"Didn't Grandpa tell you?" Grandma made a *"tsking"* noise as she took off her boots and lined them up against the wall. "We went to Rosemont, to visit an old high school friend of mine. What a lovely day. Thank you, Helene." She kissed Mommy on the cheek and hung her coat on a hook. Then she put on her slippers, which sat on top of the radiator waiting for her all toasty like she liked them, and she went off to her room.

"Grandma's happy, isn't she, Mommy?"

"Right now she is." Mommy yawned and put her things away. "But if this snow keeps up, her arthritis will hurt by morning, and she won't be happy then. Still, it is beautiful out. Come to the window with me."

Raquel and Mommy stood by the window looking out at the falling snow. "I want to be happy, Mommy. Really happy."

"Did something happen, Raquel?"

"Not really. But I don't like this time of year. I don't like you making a delicious lunch for your cookie group. And I don't like seeing all the presents everyone gets."

"The holidays are hard on you." Mommy put her arm around Raquel's waist and pulled her closer. "Every year I hope you'll truly love your presents, and every year you're disappointed. But maybe this year will be different."

"How can it be?" said Raquel.

"You're a big girl now," Mommy said slowly. "Maybe you'd like to choose one of your presents this year. How about we go shopping together after dinner?"

"Okay," said Raquel.

All through dinner, Raquel tried to figure out what present she'd choose. No particular thing came to mind. But that was okay. The mall would have zillions of great things. Still, she wished she knew what else Hector and Sarah and Rasheed would be getting. She wished she knew what everyone in her class would be getting. That way she could get the same thing.

Raquel helped wash the dishes after dinner almost without being aware of what she was doing. What if she chose something to wear—a pretty outfit, maybe—and then Sarah got the same outfit but in a better color? Or what if Sarah got an outfit that was a lot prettier? No, Raquel couldn't get anything to wear. And she couldn't get toys, because Hector always got terrific toys. And she couldn't get anything that looked foreign, because it might be from Africa and maybe Rasheed would be getting the same thing, only somehow better.

By the time Raquel got in the car with Mommy to go to the mall, she was in a thoroughly foul mood. She slammed the car door, jammed her hands into her mittens, and folded her arms angrily across her chest.

"What's the matter with you all of a sudden?" asked Mommy.

“I want everything,” said Raquel. “Otherwise everyone else will have better things than me. And there are no perfectly happy people in my school, so, really, presents don’t matter, because I’ll never be happy.”

Mommy looked bewildered. “Let’s just take this one step at a time, okay? We can walk slowly around the mall, no rush. I’ll help you. Try to calm down.”

Angel Talk

"She's going backward," groaned the little angel. He sat on the bus seat and dropped his head in his hands. "Raquel finally seemed to like her own stuff as much as other people's and she finally seemed to care about other people's happiness, not just her own. And now, look, she's back where she started."

The Archangel of Happiness sat down on the seat beside the little angel and nudged him with his shoulder. The little angel looked up at him. "When you wrote that note in the first place, I wasn't at all sure you were on the right track," said the archangel. "After all, you can't get happy just from trading with someone. Happiness doesn't lie in toys or clothes or fancy presents."

"I know," said that little angel. "It was a mistake. One giant mistake."

"That's what I thought at first. But gradually I've come around to it." The archangel ruffled the little angel's hair. "You're on to something good."

"How can you say that?" said the little angel. "We just agreed that happiness has nothing to do with what things you own."

"Right. But there was more to your note than that." The Archangel of Happiness smiled. "You're guiding Raquel toward something important."

The little angel groaned. "That's just it. I'm not guiding Raquel at all. Nothing that's happened so far has been according to a plan of mine—it just happened."

"Little angel, it's okay to take delight in good things, even when they're not within your control."

That sounded right to the little angel, but he was still confused. "The thing is, I don't know what to do next."

“Then go back to basics. Your note was clear. Help Raquel to keep searching for a perfectly happy person. I think her ideas will change if you do.”

The Little Angel of Happiness pursed his lips in dismay. “It’s so hard to find a perfectly happy person.”

“That’s just the point, isn’t it?”

The little angel sucked in his breath. “Oh. I think I’m starting to see what you mean. Yes, I get it.”

Mittens

"My feet hurt. I knew I shouldn't have put these boots back on." Mommy walked to a bench and dropped onto it with a little *wuuf* sound. "You really don't like anything we've seen so far?"

Raquel wouldn't speak. She did like a lot of things they'd seen. But she didn't dare make a choice. And it was hot, walking around in her coat. She had unzipped it and put her mittens in her pockets, but it was still hot. And she was getting a headache.

The mall crowd jabbered. In fact, the whole place—the walls, the floor, the lights—everything gave off a buzz. Raquel thought of that song "Silent Night." Nothing was silent about tonight. An ugly bell clanged in the background. The holiday greed was so noisy, Raquel put her hands over her ears.

"Is something wrong?" Mommy's mouth moved with the words, so Raquel could make them out, but she could barely hear them. Mommy patted the bench beside her. "Come sit down and snuggle up for a moment."

Raquel turned her back on Mommy. That's when she saw it. An angel. A tall one, at least as tall as Daddy. With a white gown and a halo. The face of the angel was painted a creamy color with pink cheeks. It looked as plastic as it was. But the eyes, oh, the eyes of that angel were deep and dark and warm. And they held a silent calm.

Raquel turned to Mommy again quickly, letting her hands fall. "I'm going to look at that angel in the window display over there while you rest, okay?"

"Sure. I can keep an eye on you from here." Mommy slipped off one boot and rubbed her foot. "Enjoy yourself."

But Raquel was already dodging in and out of the shoppers. By the time she got to the angel, another girl was standing in front of

it. Well, that was okay. Raquel stood beside her without a word.

The girl smiled at Raquel. “Isn’t she the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?”

“I don’t know about that,” said Raquel. “But her eyes are wonderful.”

“Yes.” The girl looked back at the angel solemnly. “Her eyes are just like a real angel’s.”

“How would you know?” asked Raquel.

“Hey.” The girl waved through the window at a woman who waved back at her and disappeared down the store aisle. “That’s my aunt. She’s looking for something to get me, but I’m not supposed to see what. That’s why I’m out here.”

“What do you hope she gets you?” asked Raquel.

“I don’t care. My aunt always picks great things.”

“No one always picks great things,” said Raquel. “What if she picks something too babyish?”

“I like baby things. And I like big-kid things. Really, I don’t care what she picks.”

“But what if she picks something you already have,” said Raquel. “You’d care then.”

“Uh-uh. I could always give my old one away.”

Raquel’s breath came a little faster. “What if she gives you something really breakable and you break it? That would be terrible, right?”

The girl knit her brows. “Why’re you asking all these questions?”

“You seem happy,” said Raquel.

“I am.”

“Perfectly happy?” Raquel asked, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice.

The girl laughed. “You’re sort of strange.”

“If your aunt bought you everything in this whole store, would you be happier? Tell the truth,” said Raquel. “It matters.”

“We’re not rich.” The girl scratched the back of her hand and looked at Raquel with confusion on her face.

"It's a what-if. What if she bought everything? Wouldn't you be much happier then?"

"I don't need everything," said the girl. "I don't really even need whatever she's buying right now. But it's fun on Christmas when we hand each other our gifts." She smiled coaxingly. "That's the fun part, right? When everybody opens their presents and kisses each other."

Raquel patted her pockets frantically. She needed something to trade. Here was a perfectly happy person, at last. But the only thing she could find on her was a quarter and her mittens. It wasn't nice to trade money, anyone knew that. So her mittens would just have to do. "Will you trade mittens with me?"

"Mittens?"

"Yes. Let's trade."

The girl slowly shook her head. "No, thanks."

Raquel held out her mittens. "Mine are nice. See? No holes. They're almost new."

"They're very nice," said the girl. "And they're a good color."

"So trade with me."

"I can't," said the girl.

"Your aunt won't see," Raquel said in desperation. "And who's going to tell on you? Please trade with me."

"It's not that." The girl backed up, shaking her head.

"Then what is it? I need your mittens."

"I left mine on the school bus a couple of weeks ago."

Raquel stared at the girl. "You don't have mittens? How do you keep your hands warm?"

The girl laughed. "I put them in my pockets when it's cold."

"But why didn't you ask your aunt to get you some for Christmas?"

"My mom would have gotten mad if she knew I'd lost them. Like I said, we're not rich." The girl shrugged. "Anyway, it's more fun when my aunt picks a gift herself, because then I know she's getting something she thinks is nice, too."

"You don't have anything else to trade, do you?" asked Raquel.

"No. Why?"

"I just wanted to trade." Raquel sighed. "No reason."

The girl pointed. "Look, my aunt's paying."

Raquel watched the girl's aunt open her purse and pull out a wallet. "What are you getting her for Christmas?"

"I made her a kerchief. I mean, I didn't actually make the whole thing. I bought a package of men's white handkerchiefs and I did potato prints all over them."

"What are potato prints?" asked Raquel.

"They're easy. You slice a raw potato in half. Then on the flat inside part, you cut out a design. And you can dip it in paint and then press the potato on cloth. It's as good as a print set without costing anything. My aunt's kerchief has green frogs. And my mom's kerchief has yellow lizards. And both of my little brothers are getting red dogs. They'll tie them around their necks, of course. Boys don't wear kerchiefs on their heads." The girl seemed to get more and more excited as she talked. "Making presents costs less, and then you can give something everyone loves."

As the girl talked, Raquel's throat got thick. She swallowed. "You're always happy, aren't you?"

"What a silly thing to say," said the girl. "I don't know anyone who's always happy. But when something makes me cry, I try to think about good things, and usually I get happy again pretty fast." She tilted her head. "Did something bad happen to you?"

"No," said Raquel. "Nothing." She shook her head and laughed. "That's the truth. I don't need a blue saucer or a soccer goal. I don't even play soccer."

"What are you talking about?"

The girl's aunt came out of the store. "Come on, Maureen." She smiled broadly. "Say good-bye to your friend and let's get on home." She put her shopping bags on the floor and looked at her coat buttons as she fastened them.

"I've got to go," said Maureen.

"Here." Raquel thrust her mittens in Maureen's hands. "I have an old pair at home that are almost as good."

"I don't need them," said Maureen. "Really."

"Neither do I. And it'll make me happy if you have them."

Maureen blinked. Then she smiled. "Well, okay." She hugged Raquel. "There. We traded, like you wanted—mittens for a hug. Bye." She ran to her aunt, who was just putting a wool scarf around her neck.

Raquel grinned and waved. Then she went back to the bench. "I know what I want to buy now, Mommy."

Mommy put on her boot and stood up. "Good. Did you see something in the window of that store?"

"Nope. Come on." Raquel pulled Mommy through the crowds, past the man clanging that annoying bell for the Salvation Army. But now the noise didn't seem awful anymore. It seemed delightful. Raquel turned around and put her quarter in the man's pot. Then she pulled Mommy again, into the department store. She was glad that her friends were getting the presents they really wanted. And she still didn't know what presents she wanted to get, but that didn't matter so much anymore, because she knew the presents she wanted to give. "This way. To the men's handkerchiefs."

Angel Talk

The newest Archangel of Happiness flew out into the snowfall with the clang of the Salvation Army bell growing softer and softer. It was an eerily beautiful sound, the sound that announced his wings.

The archangel wondered what kind of potato prints Raquel would make on those handkerchiefs. It would be fun to watch her smile as she prepared gifts for her parents and grandparents. And maybe for Sarah and her other friends. But he couldn't take the time to follow Raquel home right now.

This task had pretty much unfolded in its own way. Oh, he had written the initial crazy note that got things going. And he had helped Grandpa up the stairs—and down again. And he had ushered Maureen over to the plastic angel. But lots of what happened just happened on its own. It was pure luck that Maureen didn't have mittens.

Still, there was something about the way Maureen talked to her aunt as they were coming into the mall that made the angel recognize happiness in Maureen. And that's what made him lead Maureen over to look at the plastic angel, where Raquel met her.

Maybe that's all an angel could and should really do—put the ingredients together and watch what formed on its own. The trick was in putting the right ingredients together in the first place.

The storm that was coming faster and faster was out of the archangel's control, too. But other things were in his control. He could fly above the streets and find people and animals out in the cold. He could usher them to warmth and safety. So much happiness lay ahead. The archangel flew to greet it.

Meet the Little Angel of Empathy in Aladdin

Angelwings

No.15 Partners

Rabies

Drew sat on the grass. Jill and Faith sat nearby, combing their dolls' hair. Mom and Dad sat on the front step talking, or, rather, Mom was talking a mile a minute and Dad was sitting there looking dazed. They were all waiting for the moving van to arrive with their stuff, so that they could carry it into their new house. But the van was late.

Drew moved closer to his sisters. He pulled up a handful of grass and threw it on them.

"What do you want?" said Jill.

"Nothing."

"Then get back," said Faith.

"I don't have anything to do." Drew scratched the back of his knees. The grass made him itchy. "Let me play with your stupid dolls with you."

"They're not stupid," said Jill.

"You're stupid," said Faith.

Drew stuck out his tongue.

The moving van pulled up.

"Finally," said Mom. "Charge!" She ran at the van like a captain leading her troops into battle. Mom was usually sweet—really sweet—but she had gotten kind of wound up these last few days. Maybe moving wasn't good for her.

Drew carried all the boxes marked with a huge, red capital D into his bedroom. He had packed them and marked them himself, so he knew exactly where they should go—right in the center of his floor. He plopped them down, one after the other, in a nice, wide tower. When Drew finished, he walked back up the ramp into the moving van and looked around. Dad had said that none of the kids were allowed to carry the furniture or the biggest boxes.

But a few medium-size boxes remained—all marked with F or J. His sisters' boxes. Drew reached for one.

"Don't you touch that." Jill came running up the ramp and whisked the box out from under Drew's hands. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"I was going to help," said Drew.

"You never help," said Jill.

"Besides, I saw you throw your boxes into your room," said Faith, hurrying into the van. "You probably broke half your stuff. And I bet you were planning on breaking our stuff, too. Here, Jill, you carry the rest of your boxes in while I stand guard, and then I'll carry the rest of my boxes in while you stand guard."

The girls glowered at Drew.

Drew blew raspberries at them.

"Rrrrufff! Rrrrufff!" A dog appeared in the driveway.

"What a fat dog." Jill moved closer to Faith.

"Yuck, he looks old," said Faith.

Both of them moved deeper into the van. Drew stood perfectly still, his eyes on that big dog. It was golden brown with long, wavy hair and wide, floppy ears and round, watery eyes. It looked sort of like an overgrown stuffed animal that had been beaten up over the years.

"Get back here, Drew," said Faith.

Drew shook his head. "He doesn't look mean."

"I'm the oldest," said Faith, "so I'm in charge. Get back here with us."

Drew didn't move.

Neither did the dog. He seemed to be waiting. All at once he stood on his hind legs and jumped around.

"Crazy dog," screamed Jill.

"Rabies," shouted Faith. "Get away! Shoo, you ugly thing!"

The dog gave a weird, strangled sort of whine and loped off.

Drew leaned out of the end of the van to see where the dog had gone.

"Don't do that," said Faith. "He might be waiting to pounce."

But the dog wasn't waiting to pounce. He walked slowly across the street and up the walk to the house opposite theirs. He climbed the steps and slumped down onto the front porch.

Drew jumped out of the van and hid around the side.

In a few minutes, Faith and Jill came cautiously out onto the ramp, holding hands.

"Rrrrufff!" barked Drew, jumping out at them.

They screamed and ran into the house.

Angel Talk

"I thought you said there was only one child I was supposed to help." The Little Angel of Empathy walked through the backyard of the family's new house. "And instead I've got to help two, and they both play with dolls, and I don't like dolls, and, well, they're both mean." The little angel ran her hand along a hedge of hibiscus bushes. "And then there's that dog. I'm not fond of dogs, especially big ones like that. I didn't get close enough to it to be sure, but it probably smells bad. Plus, it's noisy."

The Archangel of Empathy strolled along beside the little angel as though he didn't have a care in the world.

The Little Angel of Empathy jumped ahead and planted herself right in the archangel's path. "Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

The archangel smiled. "I was just giving you a chance to finish talking. Are you through?"

The little angel flushed. She did have a habit of talking too much. She nodded. "First of all, I didn't realize how you felt about dogs. If you don't want this task, if you're really afraid, I can give it to someone else."

The little angel touched the middle of a flower. Yellow pollen coated her fingertip. "I don't like the idea of being a quitter before I've even tried, but, well, does that dog really have rabies?"

"Not at all. He's just an old dog."

"Oh." The little angel sniffed at the flower, careful to keep her nose away from the pollen. A mild sweetness filled the air. "Florida is interesting. It's already the middle of December and there are still flowers all over the place. I like it here."

"Does that mean you want this task after all?"

"I guess so. But I'm staying away from that dog. And I should get double the number of feathers since I have two children to help."

"The girls aren't your task, little angel," said the Archangel of Empathy. "It's Drew who needs help."

"Drew? But those girls are so mean to him."

"Hmmm." The archangel rubbed his chin in mock consternation. "Imagine, the girls acted like that when Drew didn't do anything."

"All right, all right. I admit he's bratty, throwing grass and sticking out his tongue and everything. But in my opinion, they deserve it. Plus, Faith is awful. She acted as bossy as the Little Angel of Patience in the kitchen this morning."

"Bossiness really gets to you, doesn't it? We're going to have to talk about that, I think."

"Ahhhh!" came a scream from the house.

"But we'd better talk later," said the archangel. "Now it's time for work."

About the Author

Donna Jo Napoli is the acclaimed and award-winning author of many novels, both fantasies and contemporary stories. She won the Golden Kite Award for *Stones in Water* in 1997. Her novel *Zel* was named an American Bookseller Pick of the Lists, a Publishers Weekly Best Book, a Bulletin Blue Ribbon, and a School Library Journal Best Book, and a number of her novels have been selected as ALA Best Books. She is a professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, where she lives with her husband. Visit her at DonnaJoNapoli.com.

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